

UC Santa Cruz

UC Santa Cruz Previously Published Works

Title

GENDERED LANGUAGE AND SEXIST THOUGHT

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7q82x062>

Journal

Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 69(1)

ISSN

0037-976X

Authors

Leaper, Campbell

Bigler, Rebecca S

Publication Date

2004-05-01

DOI

10.1111/j.1540-5834.2004.06901012.x

Peer reviewed

COMMENTARY

GENDERED LANGUAGE AND SEXIST THOUGHT

Campbell Leaper and Rebecca S. Bigler

Gelman, Taylor, and Nguyen have carried out an impressive investigation into the socialization of gender during early childhood. That is, the researchers take a careful and detailed look at mothers' talk about gender to their children. The focus is on language that both reflects and fosters essentialist beliefs about gender. The authors also considered speech that challenges gender stereotypes. In doing so, they integrate and advance ideas within four research areas: gender socialization (e.g., Bussey & Bandura, 1999), children's concept development (e.g., Gelman, 2003), language and gender (e.g., Henley, 1989), and feminist psychology (e.g., Bohan, 1993).

Whereas many studies have previously examined gender-related variations in parents' language style with their children, there has not been a corresponding interest in examining how gender itself is referenced (see Raasch, Leaper, & Bigler, 2004, for an exception). Gelman and her colleagues have examined implicit ways that language defines gender through references to generic gender categories (e.g., "Girls play with dolls"), gender labeling (e.g., "That's a boy racing the car"), and gender contrasts (e.g., "That's for girls, not boys"). We believe that their work represents a significant advance in the field, especially for understanding the origins of gender typing. In our commentary, we note some of the important theoretical bases of the work, and highlight some of the findings that we feel are especially important. Throughout, we suggest avenues for future research. In our closing comments, we consider some implications of the research for changing gendered components of language and its use.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The *Monograph* adopts one of several possible theoretical stances on the origins of gender typing, and more specifically, the role of language in

shaping gender typing. Liben and Bigler (2002) outlined three broad families of theoretical approaches to understanding gender role development: essentialism, environmentalism, and constructivism. Gender essentialist explanations argue that most gender differences are innate and the product of evolutionary pressures that differed for males and females. Such theories view gendered language and sexist thought as the *products* of men's and women's inherently different natures. That is, neither gendered language, nor sexist thought, are viewed as important determinants of gender typing, or each other. According to this interpretation, gendered language evolved to reflect important differences in the world (e.g., gender is essentialist and, thus, so is the language used to speak about it); gender stereotypes are adaptive because they generally contain a "kernel of truth." Gelman and her co-authors do not adopt this theoretical stance, but neither do their data clearly refute such a position. We view their findings as most compatible with the other two families of explanation.

A second broad class of theories views gender typing as the result of social practices, referred to as gender environmentalism. For many decades, work within this tradition emphasized the role of operant conditioning (e.g., reinforcement), observational learning, and direct teaching in shaping gender development. Many researchers explored the role of language as a vehicle through which these mechanisms can operate. For example, verbal messages might be used to reinforce children's gender stereotypic behaviors. Indeed, many parents tend to openly encourage gender-typed activities in their children (see Leaper, 2002; Lytton & Romney, 1991). Researchers have also observed parents using language differently with girls and boys. For example, Leaper, Anderson, and Sanders (1998) found in their meta-analysis that mothers were more talkative, used more supportive speech, and more directive speech with daughters than with sons. Within the environmentalist theoretical paradigm, the focus was on the valence of messages (e.g., positive or negative reactions) or the way words are used (e.g., directive or supportive speech)—rather than the content of the words themselves (e.g., use of generics).

Gender environmentalist approaches, however, have fallen out of favor over the last two decades for many reasons. There is increasing evidence that environmental factors alone could not account for the extensive and rigid gender typing typical of early childhood. For example, children often make stereotypic statements ("Only boys like oysters") that were not taught to them or modeled by others. A second reason for the decline is that it became clear that cognitive factors were mediating the process of gender typing (e.g., Martin & Ruble, 2004). For example, for role models to have an impact, children must abstract the social category that particular models represent. They must further infer that the role model is representative of the social category (Perry & Bussey, 1979). As a result of these trends, many

researchers turned away from solely examining environmental influences on gender typing.

The work by Gelman and her colleagues is notable in that it is characterized, in part, by a gender environmentalist approach. The authors take a very detailed look at the linguistic input that children receive about gender. They examine, for example, whether mothers are (1) directly teaching children about the links between gender and various attributes (e.g., “Boys like to drive race cars”) and (2) reinforcing or discouraging (via agreement or contradiction) children’s gender-typed statements. That is, their analysis follows the tradition of much earlier work examining the consequences that children receive for their gender-typed or cross-gender-typed behavior (see Leaper, 2002). At the same time, the *Monograph* moves well beyond documenting instances of direct teaching and reinforcement, and includes components that are drawn from the third family of theories of gender differentiation.

The work by Gelman and her colleagues fits best within the family of theories that Liben and Bigler referred to as gender constructivism. Most contemporary theoretical approaches are constructivist in nature (see Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Leaper, 2000; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Constructivist theories reject the position that children are passive recipients of environmental messages (e.g., explicit messages) about gender. Instead, children are viewed as active agents who seek to extract and understand the important social categories in their environment. Thus, the environment is seen as only one source of information for constructing ideas about gender. The *Monograph* clearly reflects such a stance. Gelman and her colleagues do not propose that parents directly teach, or even reinforce, gender essentialist thinking. (One could, for example, imagine a mother commenting, “It’s a girl. Girls are different in lots of very important ways from boys.”) Instead, Gelman et al. claim that children construct gender categories that are characterized by essentialist elements, and that they do so *without explicit instruction* from their parents.

So why do children attend to gender and construct essentialist theories about gender? Gelman and colleagues believe that adult speakers provide children with important *implicit* messages about gender via the use of gender labels, gender contrasts, and generics; and that children use these cues in constructing theories about the meaning and importance of gender. Gelman et al.’s emphasis on children’s developing gender concepts, and the relation between language and cognition, fits well with gender constructivists’ emphasis on how children actively construct their understandings of gender, and how these concepts guide their behavior. At the same time, by pointing to the role of parents in transmitting these messages and providing evaluative responses, the research is compatible with the environmentalists’ emphasis on the influences of direct teaching and feedback. As Gelman,

Taylor, and Nguyen (p. 93) state, “children’s gender concepts are unlikely to be wholly self-generated, and instead are open to cultural and environmental influences.”

RELATIONS BETWEEN GENDERED LANGUAGE AND SEXIST THOUGHT

During the last two decades, the study of language and gender has become a field of its own. Of particular relevance to the present *Monograph* is the work examining how gendered language affects thought (see Gentner & Loewenstein, 2002). To this end, some of these researchers have invoked the Whorfian hypothesis (i.e., language shapes thought). Words are concepts and having a word for something thereby affects how one thinks about the world. The weaker version of the Whorfian hypothesis softens the causal relationship between language and thought, and more generally argues that language and thought are correlated and likely influence one another (Khorsroshahi, 1989).

Some previous research supports the notion that the use of gendered language and having gender-stereotypic thoughts are reciprocally related. For example, studies show that the generic use of masculine pronouns (“he”) and nouns (“man”) tends to lead to male imagery in children’s and adults’ thinking (Henley, 1989; Hyde, 1984). Similarly, Liben, Bigler, and Krogh (2002) reported that occupational titles that are marked for gender (e.g., “policeman”) are more likely to be viewed by children as being appropriate for only one gender than those that are unmarked (e.g., plumber). At the same time, gender attitudes appear to affect language use and interpretation. Liben et al. (2002) indicated that children with traditional attitudes were more likely to believe that occupational labels marked for gender (e.g., “policeman”) apply mostly to men than were their more egalitarian peers. The work reported in the *Monograph* is consistent with the idea that gendered language shapes gender typing and simultaneously that gender typing shapes language use and comprehension.

It is important to note, however, that Gelman et al.’s research seeks to address the *causal* influences of maternal language on children’s gender typing. That is, the authors believe that adults’ gendered language determines, at least in part, why and how children come to think about gender. They argue that mothers’ use of generics, for example, may cause their children to attend to gender and, further, to develop essentialist beliefs about gender. For example, a mother who states, “Girls play with dolls,” in response to a picture depicting a girl with a doll reifies the stereotype that *only* girls play with dolls.

Highlighting a pervasive source for implicit gender socialization—that is, essentialist language—is perhaps the most significant contribution of the study. This subtle (but ubiquitous) form of gender socialization is likely to increase the salience of gender; lead children to believe that individuals of different genders have deep, nonobvious and substantive differences; and provide regular reminders to children about the roles, traits, and activities that girls and boys are supposed to demonstrate. Accordingly, generics and other implicit forms of gendered language essentialize gender and provide gender proscriptions.

Some of the findings reported in the *Monograph* are consistent with a causal interpretation. For example, there was an apparent developmental shift in whether the mother or the child was more likely to introduce generics. Among the younger children, generics were primarily introduced by the mothers. However, by the age of 4 years, children were introducing more generics than were mothers. Similarly, there is empirical evidence indicating that the generic use of the pronoun “he” or noun phrases using “man” might *cause* gender-biased thinking (see Henley, 1989; Hyde, 1984). As the authors note, however, the data reported in the *Monograph* are merely suggestive of a causal link. Future work should examine possible causal links between various forms of gendered language and gender-typed thinking. We offer a few directions for study.

Because the age range that we are considering—approximately between 2 and 4 years of age—is not very great, longitudinal studies are feasible, and they would be helpful in addressing possible causal influences. One research question is whether language shapes thought, or if thinking shapes how one uses language. (A third possibility is for a reciprocal influence between language and thought.) To consider if variations in parents’ use of gendered language do affect children’s developing gender concepts, it would be necessary first to examine if parents’ speech predicts the onset of young children’s gender stereotypes. In an analogous manner, longitudinal studies have been able to establish that the amount of maternal language input predicts children’s later vocabulary growth (e.g., Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991). Second, researchers may examine if there is a direct relation between the specific types of roles, traits, and activities referenced in parents’ gendered speech and the specific stereotypes that children subsequently endorse. Third, longitudinal research could track age-related changes in children’s gender-typed beliefs and later use of gendered language. In this way, researchers could examine whether the onset of more egalitarian attitudes is predictive of subsequent changes in children’s language use. A challenge to testing these research questions, however, is that few (if any) children are exposed only to the speech of their parents. It is common for young children—even toddlers—to hear language from many sources including older siblings, daycare teachers, and television programs.

In addition to longitudinal designs, experimental work also would be useful. For example, the language used to introduce novel objects or roles could be systematically varied (e.g., using generics or specific terms), and children's subsequent levels of gender typing could be measured. For example, a variation on Bradbard, Martin, Endsley, and Halverson's (1986) classic gender study could be performed. These researchers randomly labeled novel objects as either "for girls" or "for boys." Children subsequently explored and later remembered details about objects if the objects were labeled for their own gender compared to the other gender. In an analogous manner, a researcher could take a novel toy labeled with a novel word (e.g., Akhtar, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 1996) and reference gender using generics (e.g., "Girls like to play with the toma") or nongenerics (e.g., "This girl likes to play with the toma"). After exposing children to statements like this, researchers could later assess children's beliefs about girls' and boys' preferences for these objects (see Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995). One methodological challenge, however, would be to disambiguate children's memories for what was said versus their actual endorsement of a new stereotype.

To underscore the potential impact of essentialist language in children's lives, the authors appropriately cited MacKay's (1980) insightful analysis of how sexist language functions as effective propaganda: Propaganda techniques are most successful when they occur frequently; they are covert and indirect (and thereby difficult to challenge); they begin appearing at an early age; and they are associated with high-prestige sources (e.g., parents). We agree with this view. It is likely that children hear generic references to gender throughout each day and across home and school settings (Leaper, 1995a; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). In their analysis of preschool classrooms, for example, Lloyd and Duveen (1992) observed that the teachers regularly used generic language to refer to girls and boys. Moreover, these were not teachers who endorsed traditional notions of gender. They openly professed their desire to avoid sexism. Nonetheless, the researchers observed that "the class teacher's most common way of employing gender-group membership and highlighting social categories was by invoking the terms 'girls' or 'boys', either singly or together, to organize classroom activity. . . She called out 'boys' to tell children, usually the same particular boys, to stop running around, to calm down and to be careful, a comment on their behavioural style. . ." (p. 65). In thinking about the possible impact of such language, it is useful to imagine a world in which similar speech patterns were applied to race. Most individuals readily predict that the routine use of racial labels ("Good morning, Whites and Latinos") would result in increased levels of racial stereotyping and prejudice (see Bigler, 1995).

In summary, Gelman, Taylor, and Nguyen's research suggests that the relation between language and thought may be complicated. On the one

hand, there was some indication that mothers' and children's gender-related cognitions were related to their respective uses of gendered language. This finding is consistent with some prior research indicating that women with feminist attitudes are less likely than other women to use sexist language (Jacobson & Insko, 1985; Matheson & Kristiansen, 1987). In this way, a link between language and thought is implicated. However, what seems more compelling was that mothers who endorsed egalitarian gender attitudes typically affirmed children's stereotypes and often used generic statements in their speech. The latter set of findings imply a disconnection between the mothers' thoughts and their speech. The reasons for such a disconnection are discussed in the following section.

RELATIONS AMONG MOTHERS' AND CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

Gelman, Taylor, and Nguyen's data give us several interesting glimpses into the manner in which mothers socialize their children's beliefs about gender. We highlight a few of those findings here. It is first important to note that, overall, the mothers in the sample explicitly endorsed egalitarian gender attitudes. Specifically, they stated that *both* men and women should perform over 80% of the 71 gender-typed activities and occupations about which they were asked. At the same time, their children endorsed gender-stereotypic attitudes, as reflected in their responses to the stereotyping scale and spontaneous comments about gender. Thus, here as in other research, children's and their mothers' gender attitudes were not strongly related (see Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002).

Despite the fact that the majority of mothers could be classified as having egalitarian beliefs, they appear to do little to inculcate such beliefs in their children. When children in the sample made stereotype-consistent statements, their mothers' most common response was to affirm the children's statement. Mothers explicitly negated their children's stereotype-consistent statements less than 3% of the time. Why were negations so infrequent in occurrence?

One possibility is that mothers, even feminist ones, make little attempt to socialize their young children to endorse similar beliefs. There are several possible motivations that might drive mothers with egalitarian views to keep their views to themselves. First, egalitarian mothers may *want* their children to become *knowledgeable* about the cultural stereotypes of gender and may do little, therefore, to interfere with their young children's accumulation of gender stereotype knowledge. That is, parents may believe that ignorance about gender stereotypes will lead children to look dumb in front of peers (e.g., a boy who announces to his kindergarten class that men can wear nail

polish), or even to violate gender norms themselves and risk ridicule by their peers (e.g., a boy who wears nail polish to kindergarten).

Second, feminist mothers may assume that young children are *incapable* of understanding the environmental factors that produce skewed distributions of males and females into various traits and roles (including gender discrimination) and, thus, are reluctant to contradict the gender stereotypic statements of young children. These same mothers may begin to challenge their children's gender-typed beliefs when their children are older. Indeed, Gelman et al. did find that mothers were significantly more likely to challenge stereotype affirmations by 4- and 6-year-olds (3–4%) than those by 2-year-olds (less than 1%).

Third, mothers with egalitarian or feminist beliefs may be opposed by other family members, such as fathers and grandparents, in the goal of raising nonsexist children. Generally, studies indicate that fathers are more rigid in their gender typing of children, especially of sons, than are mothers (see Leaper, 2002). Fathers may prevail upon mothers to minimize their nonsexist teaching. Future research should ask mothers and fathers about their goals with respect to nonsexist child rearing, including their strategies for communicating their beliefs to their children.

A final reason we propose for why mothers may have been so unlikely to challenge children's gender stereotypes—and to be so likely to use generics themselves—is that many women may hold *contradictory* gender attitudes. Research on implicit stereotyping and prejudice suggests that people's conscious and unconscious attitudes are sometimes discrepant (Brauer, Wasel, & Niedenthal, 2000; Cunningham, Preacher, & Banaji, 2001). For example, a person who openly endorses racial equality may show signs of racial prejudice in a reaction-time paradigm (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). In an analogous manner, many mothers who consciously endorse gender-egalitarian ideals may harbor some traditional attitudes. Some support for such a notion is reported in the *Monograph*. Mothers typically offered few explicit stereotyped statements themselves. However, when implicit statements were analyzed, they occurred with high frequency in mothers' speech. Almost every mother in the sample (96%) made at least one generic statement about gender. Similarly, mothers were extremely likely (89%) to use at least one gender-ostensive labeling comment, and most (64%) mothers made at least one gender contrast. We do not mean to imply that these mothers are being disingenuous when they endorse gender-egalitarian views. On the contrary, we expect that many mothers *simultaneously* endorse genuinely egalitarian explicit beliefs about gender *and* hold more sexist implicit beliefs about gender. Accordingly, a critical goal of consciousness-raising groups is to increase participants' awareness of the many forms of bias that can be unconsciously perpetuated (Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 1991).

Another finding related to the endorsement of contradictory gender attitudes is notable. Gelman and colleagues found a greater incidence of both gender-stereotyped and gender-egalitarian beliefs among older children in their sample. That is, by age 6, children seemed to be developing contradictory beliefs about gender. Accordingly, Gelman and her co-authors point out that knowledge and beliefs cannot be characterized along a single dimension of stereotyping. By way of example, they cite Killen, Pisacane, Lee-Kim, and Ardila-Rey's (2001) work showing that children's gendered beliefs differ depending on their applications of moral versus social-conventional reasoning. We believe examining if and how children (and adults) can hold contradictory beliefs about gender is an intriguing topic for further study.

Despite the dissimilarities in their explicit gender attitudes, mothers' and children's language showed several important similarities. For example, significant correlations were seen between mothers' and children's use of generics ($r = .48$), gender-egalitarian statements ($r = .63$), and gender-ostensive labeling ($r = .78$). Correlations between conversational partners in language style are often found. Indeed, it is a basic principle of communication accommodation theory that partners' styles of communication will converge during a conversation (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988). It is also a fundamental premise of the sociocultural theory of child development (e.g., Rogoff, 1990) that activity settings influence the types of behavior that are enacted (also see Leaper, 2000). In the present study, both mother and child were reading the same picture book together. Hence, it was likely they would refer to and discuss the same material. The influence of the activity context is further underscored by the impact of page type on the participants' speech. Gender affirmations were more likely during gender-stereotyped pages and egalitarian statements were more likely when reading counter-stereotyped pages.

Two implications of these findings follow. First, children and parents are likely to reinforce one another's speech styles. Hence, with younger children especially, parents may play an important role in guiding the kinds of concepts they develop and practice. But as children form their own ideas about gender, they may make it more difficult for parents to redirect them to alternative ways of thinking—especially if parents are reluctant to challenge their children's stereotypes (as tended to occur in the present study). A second implication is that the type of materials that we provide children matters. Books that present counter-stereotyped gender images are more likely to elicit comments that challenge traditional stereotypes. We would further underscore the importance of *counter-stereotypical* images rather than only neutral images. Prior research suggests that neutral images (e.g., gender-nonspecific animals) are often interpreted in gender-biased ways by children (Lambdin, Greer, Jibotian, Wood, & Hamilton, 2003) as well as

parents (DeLoache, Cassidy, & Carpenter, 1987). Unfortunately, media that present counter-stereotypic images are rare. Moreover, children are swamped by an exhaustive catalogue of older “classic” materials, including books and television programming, that are highly gender typed.

Another notable finding pertains to mothers’ tendency to respond differently to positive valence stereotypes (e.g., “Boys are race car drivers”) versus negative valence stereotypes (“Girls can’t be race car drivers”). Gelman and her colleagues raise interesting questions about the difference between these two types of statements. Do children understand negative valence statements as more informative about gender stereotypes than positive valence statements? Are children more likely to make generalizations from one type of statement more than the other? Positive valence statements are more pervasive in children’s daily lives. However, negative valence comments may have more salience than do positive valence statements (e.g., Rosen & Grandison, 1994). Such statements may have an especially strong impact when a child’s behavior is at odds with gender norms, and thus may trigger feelings of shame or embarrassment. For instance, hearing his father say, “Boys don’t cry,” may be more memorable for a boy than hearing his father say, “Boys are good at tools.”

The research further showed that boys were more likely than girls to make negative valence statements and to express more generics. These results are consistent with the view that gender boundaries are more rigid for males than for females (see Leaper, 1994). According to a social identity interpretation, boys have more at stake than girls in maintaining group boundaries due to males’ higher status in society (see Leaper, 1994). There is also a psychoanalytic explanation that proposes that boys’ early gender identity tends to be defined in negative terms (see Chodorow, 1978). As argued, because women are typically primary caregivers, boys tend to define their gender identity as “not-female.” Both of these interpretations could be tested in future research. To test whether higher-status group members are more likely to use generics to define group boundaries, researchers could compare the speech of high- and low-status groups that are experimentally assigned (e.g., Bigler, Brown, & Markell, 2001). Alternatively, to test if access to same-gender role models is important during early childhood, researchers could examine boys’ use of generics when their primary caregivers are fathers versus mothers.

Mothers’ frequent use of gender-essentialist language may be interpreted as contradicting the view that parents play a minimal role during gender socialization (e.g., Lytton & Romney, 1991; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Gelman and her colleagues found that parents did not often express gender stereotypes in their explicit speech. But this contrasted with mothers’ implicit speech which often reinforced gender-stereotyped notions. Moreover, mothers typically provided positive responses to

children's own affirmations of gender stereotypes. In sum, despite most of these mothers' egalitarian attitudes, they were contributing to children's gender-stereotyped views of the world.

CHANGING THE LEXICON AND ITS USES

To those individuals who are committed to gender-egalitarian ideals—such as raising children to be nonsexist or feminist—the results presented in the *Monograph* are likely to be troubling. The notion that common and widely accepted patterns of language (e.g., use of generics) may facilitate children's essentialist thinking about gender suggests that it may be important to alter aspects of our language to combat such tendencies.

There has been some significant progress in altering the lexicon to remove sexist components of language. Over the years, for example, there has been a shift in people's speech and writing away from the generic use of the masculine pronouns "he" and masculine compound nouns such as "chairman." Instead, it is now common to find people using gender-inclusive language such as "he or she" or "chairperson" (Rubin, Greene, & Schneider, 1994). The American Psychological Association made its own contribution by banning sexist language in its publications (American Psychological Association Publication Manual Task Force, 1977). However, it is probably easier to be mindful of words that exclude one gender (i.e., the generic use of masculine pronouns) than it is to be aware of one's use of generic phrases to refer to girls and boys (or to women and men). Ironically, authors of psychology studies frequently make statements that refer to gender using generics (e.g., "Women scored higher on the measure than did men"). Gelman and her colleagues, for example, state "boys provided more negative valence talk than [did] girls" (p. 138). (We are guilty of making similar statements in our own publications.) Just as children may translate generics into stereotypic beliefs, the lay public often interprets generic statements by researchers as evidence that women and men (or girls and boys) differ in important, clear, and consistent ways. In other words, the use of generics probably biases individuals to attend to between-gender differences and ignore within-gender variability. One way to address this problem is to make more effort to include qualifiers in our writing (e.g., "*On the average*, the women in our sample scored higher than did the men"). Also, we should regularly reiterate that average gender differences are typically associated with a high degree of overlap.

A more radical solution would be to call for changes to the lexicon aimed at minimizing the "lexicalization" of gender. Theoretically, several reforms are possible. For example, we might move to abolish gender-

marked pronouns (e.g., “he,” “she”) within the English language and adopt a truly neutral form (see MacKay, 1980), as occurs in some languages such as Turkish (see Graddol & Swann, 1989, p. 128). Additionally, the use of nouns (e.g., “girl,” “boy,” “man,” “woman”) that mark gender could be discouraged. Interestingly, there appears to have been just such a movement concerning race and ethnicity. Whereas use of terms such as “Negro” or “Jew” were common, we now prefer adjectives to describe race and ethnicity (as well as other forms of status such as sexual orientation and ability). For example, the statement “My neighbor is Jewish” is less offensive to some listeners than the statement “My neighbor is a Jew.” Finally, some writers (Leaper, 1995b; Lott, 1981) have argued against social scientists’ use of the terms “feminine” and “masculine” to describe behaviors on the grounds that such terms are essentialist. That is, the terms suggest that certain behaviors are inherently female-like or male-like—as opposed to human qualities that everyone can potentially share.

There have, in fact, been calls to bar the use of race as an adjective when describing individuals. A recent billboard in Austin, Texas read, “He is a very articulate black man” with a red line through the term “black.” The billboard was trying to make a point about the irrelevance of the person’s race. Paradoxically, however, the editorial change removed the reference to race and left not one but *two* markers for gender (“he” and “man”). Alternatively, the billboard could have stated “That is a very articulate person.”

Less radically, we suggest that, ideally, parents should refrain from labeling gender when it is not necessary. But this is difficult to achieve. As discussed earlier, people’s attitudes and behavior do not always match. We can offer a personal anecdote that illustrates this point. The first author has noticed that the second author often refers to her two daughters as “the girls” (rather than by their names). This occurs despite the second author endorsing feminist attitudes. Moreover, the same author has even argued against teachers referring to students in their classrooms as “boys and girls” because it reinforces unnecessary and irrelevant gender divisions (see Bigler, 1995). Old habits die hard, even for some feminists (see Leaper, 1995a).

Finally, it is worth noting that there is an important paradox inherent in the processes of fighting sexism. The goal of many individuals is to minimize the use of gender as an important social category (i.e., the use of gender for assigning traits and roles). But to explain why gender distributions are skewed (i.e., all of the Presidents of the United States have been male) requires that gender be addressed explicitly. So, Gelman and her co-authors report that when discussing stereotype-inconsistent pages, mothers were more likely to make stereotype-inconsistent remarks and *simultaneously* to emphasize gender via the use of generics (e.g., “Girls

can be fire fighters”). Ironically, they note that the process of highlighting gender (via generics) may impede the goal that the statement was aimed at achieving (i.e., reducing gender essentialism). One possible solution to the problem is to discuss sexism—including sexism within the English language—with children. Bem (1983) suggested such a strategy in her classic paper on raising gender-aschematic children, but the effectiveness of such a strategy has not been studied. Future research should examine the consequences of providing children with a sexism schema (Bem, 1983) that includes the knowledge that words used to label individuals may come to shape our beliefs and expectations of them. Although the idea of combating so many subtle and pervasive forms of sexism may seem daunting, the fact that we can imagine alternatives gives us hope.

References

- Akhtar, N., Carpenter, M., & Tomasello, M. (1996). The role of discourse novelty in early word learning. *Child Development*, **67**, 635–645.
- American Psychological Assn Publication Manual Task Force (1977). Guidelines for nonsexist language in APA journals. *American Psychologist*, **32**, 487–494.
- Bem, S. L. (1983). Gender schema theory and its implications for child development: Raising gender-aschematic children in a gender-schematic society. *Signs*, **8**, 598–616.
- Bigler, R. S. (1995). The role of classification skill in moderating environmental influences on children's gender stereotyping: A study of the functional use of gender in the classroom. *Child Development*, **66**, 1072–1087.
- Bigler, R. S., Brown, C. S., & Markell, M. (2001). When groups are not created equal: Effects of group status on the formation of intergroup attitudes in children. *Child Development*, **72**, 1151–1162.
- Bohan, J. S. (1993). Regarding gender: Essentialism, constructionism, and feminist psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, **17**, 5–21.
- Bradbard, M. R., Martin, C. L., Endsley, R. C., & Halverson, C. F. (1986). Influence of sex stereotypes on children's exploration and memory: A competence versus performance distinction. *Developmental Psychology*, **22**, 481–486.
- Brauer, M., Wasel, W., & Niedenthal, P. (2000). Implicit and explicit components of prejudice. *Review of General Psychology*, **4**, 79–101.
- Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychological Review*, **106**, 676–713.
- Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Coupland, N., Coupland, J., Giles, H., & Henwood, K. (1988). Accommodating the elderly: Invoking and extending a theory. *Language in Society*, **17**, 1–41.
- Cunningham, W. A., Preacher, K. J., & Banaji, M. R. (2001). Implicit attitude measures: Consistency, stability, and convergent validity. *Psychological Science*, **12**, 163–170.
- DeLoache, J. S., Cassidy, D. J., & Carpenter, C. J. (1987). The three bears are all boys: Mothers' gender labeling of neutral picture book characters. *Sex Roles*, **17**, 163–178.

- Fazio, H. F., Jackson, J. R., Dunton, B. C., & Williams, C. J. (1995). Variability in automatic activation as an unobtrusive measure of racial attitudes: A bona fide pipeline? *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, **69**, 1013–1027.
- Gelman, S. A. (2003). *The essential child: Origins of essentialism in everyday thought*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gentner, D., & Loewenstein, J. (2002). Relational language and relational thought. In E. Amsel & J. P. Byrnes (Eds.), *Language, literacy, and cognitive development: The development and consequences of symbolic communication* (pp. 87–120). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Graddol, D., & Swann, J. (1989). *Gender voices*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Henley, N. M. (1989). Molehill or mountain? What we know and don't know about sex bias in language. In M. Crawford & M. Gentry (Eds.), *Gender and thought: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 59–78). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Huttenlocher, J., Haight, W., Bryk, A., Seltzer, M., & Lyons, T. (1991). Early vocabulary growth: Relation to language input and gender. *Developmental Psychology*, **27**, 236–248.
- Hyde, J. S. (1984). Children's understanding of sexist language. *Developmental Psychology*, **20**, 697–706.
- Jacobson, M. B., & Insko, W. R. (1985). Use of nonsexist pronouns as a function of one's feminist orientation. *Sex Roles*, **13**, 1–7.
- Killen, M., Pisacane, K., Lee-Kim, J., & Ardila-Rey, A. (2001). Fairness of stereotypes? Young children's priorities when evaluating group exclusion and inclusion. *Developmental Psychology*, **37**, 587–596.
- Khorsroshahi, F. (1989). Penguins don't care, but women do: A social identity analysis of a Whorfian problem. *Language in Society*, **18**, 505–525.
- Lambdin, J. R., Greer, K. M., Jibotian, K. S., Wood, K. R., & Hamilton, M. C. (2003). The animal = male hypothesis: Children's and adults' beliefs about the sex of non-sex-specific stuffed animals. *Sex Roles*, **48**, 471–482.
- Leaper, C. (1994). Exploring the consequences of gender segregation on social relationships. In C. Leaper (Ed.), *Childhood gender segregation: Causes and consequences* (New Directions for Child Development, No. 65). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Leaper, C. (1995a). Constructing representations of gender in the classroom [Review of *Gender identities and education: The impact of starting school*]. *American Journal of Psychology*, **108**, 300–304.
- Leaper, C. (1995b). The use of “masculine” and “feminine” to describe women's and men's behavior. *Journal of Social Psychology*, **135**, 359–369.
- Leaper, C. (2000). The social construction and socialization of gender during development. In P. H. Miller & E. K. Scholnick (Eds.), *Toward a feminist developmental psychology* (pp. 127–152). Florence, KY, US: Taylor & Francis/Routledge.
- Leaper, C. (2002). Parenting girls and boys. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Vol. 1: Children and parenting* (2nd ed., pp. 189–225). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Leaper, C., Anderson, K. J., & Sanders, P. (1998). Moderators of gender effects on parents' talk to their children: A meta-analysis. *Developmental Psychology*, **34**, 3–27.
- Liben, L. S., & Bigler, R. S. (2002). The developmental course of gender differentiation: Conceptualizing, measuring, and evaluating constructs and pathways. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, **67** (2), vii–147.
- Liben, L. S., Bigler, R. S., & Krogh, H. R. (2002). Language at work: Children's gendered interpretations of occupational titles. *Child Development*, **73**, 810–828.
- Lloyd, B., & Duveen, G. (1992). *Gender identities and education: The impact of starting school*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

- Lott, B. (1981). A feminist critique of androgyny: Toward the elimination of gender attributions for learned behavior. In C. Mayo & N. M. Henley (Eds.), *Gender and nonverbal behavior* (pp. 171–180). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Lytton, H., & Romney, D. M. (1991). Parents' differential socialization of boys and girls: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, **109**, 267–296.
- Maccoby, E. E., & Jacklin, C. N. (1974). *The psychology of sex differences*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- MacKay, D. G. (1980). Psychology, prescriptive grammar, and the pronoun problem. *American Psychologist*, **35**, 444–449.
- Marecek, J., & Hare-Mustin, R. T. (1991). A short history of the future: Feminism and clinical psychology. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, **15**, 521–536.
- Martin, C. L., Eisenbud, L., & Rose, H. (1995). Children's gender-based reasoning about toys. *Child Development*, **65**, 1453–1471.
- Martin, C. L., & Ruble, D. (2004). Children's search for gender cues: Cognitive perspectives on gender development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, **13**, 67–70.
- Martin, C. L., Ruble, D. N., & Szkrybalo, J. (2002). Cognitive theories of early gender development. *Psychological Bulletin*, **128**, 903–933.
- Matheson, K., & Kristiansen, C. M. (1987). The effect of sexist attitudes and social structure on the use of sex-biased pronouns. *Journal of Social Psychology*, **127**, 395–398.
- Perry, D. G., & Bussey, K. (1979). The social learning theory of sex differences: Imitation is alive and well. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, **37**, 1699–1712.
- Raasch, C., Leaper, C., & Bigler, R. (2004, April). *The influence of parental discussion on children's gender stereotyping*. Poster presented at the Gender Development Research Conference, San Francisco.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Rosen, S., & Grandison, R. J. (1994). Effects of topic valence and pictorial distractor valence on verbalizing and evaluating topic-evoked visual imagery. *Motivation & Emotion*, **18**, 249–268.
- Rubin, D. L., Greene, K., & Schneider, D. (1994). Adopting gender-inclusive language reforms: Diachronic and synchronic variation. *Journal of Language & Social Psychology*, **13**, 91–114.
- Tenenbaum, H. R., & Leaper, C. (2002). Are parents' gender schemas related to their children's gender-related cognitions?: A meta analysis. *Developmental Psychology*, **38**, 615–630.

Acknowledgment

We thank Nameera Akhtar for comments on a draft of this manuscript.